

Hagret il-General – A Reminder of a Medicinal Plant

Charles J. Boffa

The history of Hagret il-General goes back a long way. Its story may be a forgotten page in the history of our Islands, but nevertheless interesting. Hagret il-General owes its name to the fact the the “Cynomorium Coccineum Linn” was discovered by the Commander of a squadron of galleys belonging to the Order of St. John. This plant which still grows on the summit and is a living reminder of the past, has its own unusual story.

This plant which is a parasite on a species of *Inula*, was first spoken of as a remedy against dysentery and haemorrhages of all sorts by the celebrated Maltese physician Bonamico and named *Fucus coccineus melitensis* by the botanist Boccone (1874). The root was dried and pulverised and the powder suspended in wine syrup or Quince jelly. Sometimes the dry powder was sprinkled on bleeding wounds after suturing.

It is difficult for us today to understand the strong beliefs by the rulers and people alike in bygone days, regarding the supposed potency of this herb. It is said that during the Great Siege, Grandmaster La Valette had a wound in his leg staunched by means of this plant. It has a limited astringent property and, according to tradition, it was also used by surgeons to decrease bleeding following certain injuries, amputations, and extractions of carious teeth. It was also claimed to be beneficial in the treatment of ulcers and gingivitis.

G.F. Abela and G. Ciantar mention that it was given to patients (possibly tuberculosis) who spat blood, and in the treatment of syphilis.

The more colloquial title ‘Fungus Rock’ comes from the plant that still grows there and was the reason why the Knights treasured it so highly. Earlier this century it was also found to exist in a few spots on the inaccessible cliffs of Dingli (Malta) and Ta’ Cenc (Gozo). The name ‘Maltese fungus’ is a misnomer for it is not a fungus, and it is not, as it was firmly believed in the past, peculiar to our Islands. It has also been found in Lampedusa, Sicily and North Africa.

Its importance today lies in its historical associations and not in its therapeutic properties, which in the light of modern science are non-existent.

One of the first writers to mention it was Comm. G.F. Abela 1771.¹ He referred to it as

“un herba che tira al vermiglio non dissimile nel di fuori, ed quanto alla forma, a i finocchi marini”. He recorded that the plant was dried, powdered and drunk to relieve dysentery.

The Knights of St. John had a high opinion of its efficacy and various Grand Masters used to send it as a gift to Kings, nobles, relatives and other personalities in Europe.

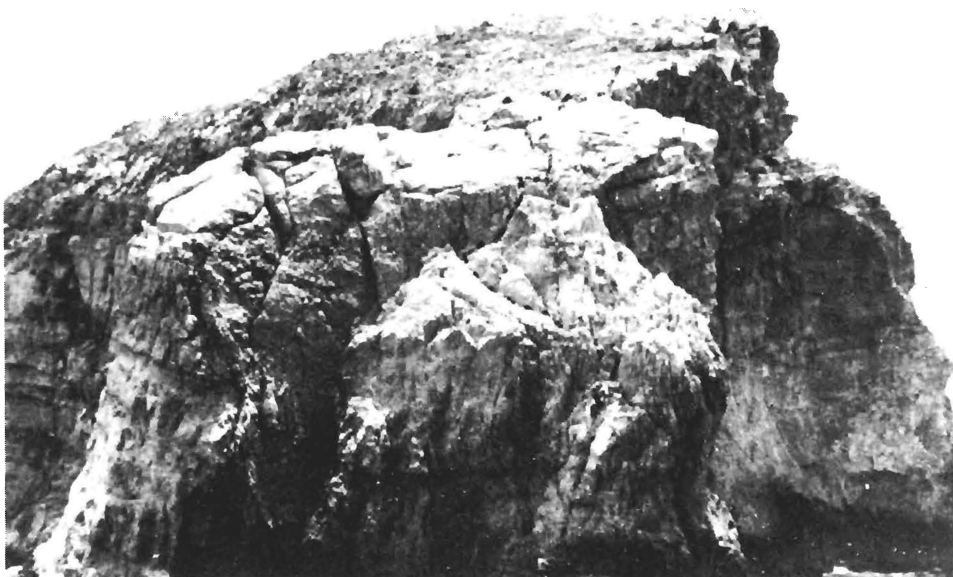
The Grand Masters did their best to guard the rock and the plant. In 1744, Grand Master Pinto ordered that the sides of the Rock were to be smoothed to render access to it more difficult. Anybody caught collecting the plant was liable to be condemned to the galleys — a harsh penalty indeed.

The following proclamation by Captain A. Ball, R.N., the first Civil Commissioner in 1800, clearly shows the value in which this plant was still held in those days and obviously was still being used to some extent in medicine and surgery:-

“Si proibisce a tutti di raccogliere il Fungus Melitensis. Avendo a caro Sua Eccellenza, che is luoghi produttivi le radici comunemente dette Fungus Melitensis, ossia Ghirch Signur (Gherq Sinjur) si erano mantenuti, ed illesi, come si mantenevano nell’antico governo, ha perciò proibito a qualunque persona di qualunque stato, condizione di non ardire di raccogliere dette radici senza li permesso di Sua Eccellenza, o del suo Segretario”. Barone F. Gauci, Capitano di Verga.

REFERENCES

1. Abela, G.F. and Ciantar G.: Malta Illustrata, 1772.



Hagret il-General (The General's Rock), Dwejra Gozo.

Taken in 1953 during a biology expedition ▲ to Dwejra in Gozo by the author and the late Joe Meilaq, Salvino Scicluna, Joe Galea, John Spiteri, Tony Wood and Tommy Vella Zarb.

Charles J. Boffa, BChD, BPharm, FICD, PhD.
Consultant Dental Surgeon -
Dept. of Health

The copyright of this article belongs to the Editorial Board of the Malta Medical Journal. The Malta Medical Journal's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text article and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

This article has been reproduced with the authorization of the editor of the Malta Medical Journal (Ref. No 000001)